

The Map of the Country

By Alice Brown

A LONG-DELAYED hour had come. It was the night before their marriage, and they two stood alone in the still parlor, free yet from the scent of flowers, its solitude unbroken by the feet of coming guests. She stretched her arms high above her head, and the white sleeves fell away from them, leaving their roundness bare; the sapphires of his bracelet gleamed dark upon her wrist, a pledge and a promise. She looked like a young priestess exalted beyond belief, and moved supremely by the anticipated rites before her.

"Oh," she breathed, passionately, "I am saying good-by to my lover!"

He stepped forward, and brought down her arms to lie about his neck.

"Good-by?" he repeated, "and to your lover? You are binding him to you forever. A word from us both, and it's done."

She looked at him, and her mood broke up into a very charming audacity not unmixed with mirth. She was still exalted, but now, from some emotion purely human, she would balk at nothing.

"Come and sit down," said she, "here in this window-seat. Tell me, have I been a good sweetheart—nice, fine, dear?"

"You are wonderful, perfect; and you always have been."

"I thought you thought so. Now I'll tell you the secret of it all. It's because I'm wise enough to order my ways. I haven't lived in Vanity Fair for nothing. Moreover, I know how to be the very perfectest wife under heaven; so perfect that you'll find yourself lonesome as death when I die and you take unto yourself another."

"Don't, love! That's blasphemy, to-night, especially. But I'll forgive it you. Of course you'll be a perfect wife. It's your nature."

"No, no, it's not my nature! It's by grace. I'm like all the rest, and to-night I prove it. I saw my plan of action, and I followed it, all through courting-time; and now, when the field's to be won, I turn traitor. I show you my chart of warfare; woman-like, I betray myself."

He frowned, but only from perplexity. She had seemed so simple! Other folk had called her clever. Other men stood admiringly aloof; but he had known she was soft and

smooth as unsnarled silk. Now she spoke like a changeling, and he looked about him for his own good child.

"I can't have you talk like that," he said. "Warfare? betrayal? One would think we were enemies."

"Oh, no! oh, no! only antagonists. There's antagonism between us—old as sex. That's why we long for each other. That's why we keep our orbits, drawn and yet pushed apart. Oh, it's a heavenly track, but don't make the mistake of thinking it can be held without the force of all the hands in all the universe. Listen, my dear, my lord! You know I love you?"

"Yes, yes! I know you do."

"I love you so much that, if I could, I'd efface the Me in me to make you happy. If I could! I know exactly how, and yet *I shall not do it*. We must go the way of all the others, running violently down a steep place into the sea of dreary common-sense."

"Oh, come now, that's not fair! Think of all the happy people we know—your father and mother, mine. It's easy enough to say the bitter thing about marriage—mighty cheap talking—but it's not fair."

"All the happy people we know! I can summon six. That's a good many. The rest have built them solid houses on the boulevard. Their castles tumbled down. But I can make you happy. Dearest, I will; still, being, as I said, a fool to-night, light-headed, dizzy, with much thought, I throw prudence to the winds and tell you the straight road. Do you know why you've seemed to love me so in all these months?"

"Seemed? Why, because I do. Because you are you, and I am I."

"Yes, that; I'm not denying the divinity of the thing. You've loved me indeed; but you've seemed to love me, too, and for one reason only. Because you are a man, born to the pleasures of the chase. I liked it, too. I was pursued; I exulted in it. To-morrow I am caught, labeled, put in my cage. I shall have fresh water and lots of sun; but the chase is over. You won't continue running when there's nothing to catch."

"But, dear love—"

"Nay, why should you? Why, indeed! But that's where the subtlety of it comes in,

the irony we never guess till late. You see I like being pursued, and I shall keep on liking it. I shall look round me on the big, big downs, and say, 'Where's the footfall I used to hear?'"

"Margaret! Margaret!"

"Now, 'List to me, my only love!' Here is something that women have learned and men have not. I'll tell it to you, and then you'll be the only man who knows. Won't that be grand? To you, all of you, marriage is an attainment; to us, it's a progress. You marry, and settle down with your pipe by the fire; I'm just as nice and just as fair as when you found new beauties in me every day, but now you judge me *au large*. You don't make inventories and read them aloud: item, one sweet temper; item, one bit of grace; item, one round cheek. I am a part of you, and it would be sore conceit thus to admire yourself. But if you did keep on idealizing me, if you did wrap me round with illusions, why, all our dreams would come true. You'd make an angel of me; and as for me, God knows I'm only too eager to call the archangel out of you."

"Suppose I don't! Suppose I go 'the way of all the rest.' What then? What will you do?"

"I individually, or I the perfect wife?"

"Both! You are the perfect wife."

"I'll tell you. I shall find out, one day, that life has got to be a little comedy, and that I am the star. I shall say, 'You don't want the inner part of me? You don't want to be bothered with the loves and doves that made your courtship bright? Very well, my lord, choose you!' And I shall be what you will: docile, sweet, unchanging, and you will never know you've lost me."

"Lost you—you, Margaret?"

"Yes, the real Me inside me, the one that longs to tell its hopes and fears and whims and fancies. For the life of the soul is real—real as oatmeal and clear coffee in the morning."

"Go on, Margaret. I like this. What else will she do, the perfect wife?"

"She will stifle lots of the natural impulses of her nature, and one especially. She will never say, 'Do you love me?' Never! never! She will stand listening at the door of your heart in still mornings and dark nights, hoping for it, hoping, hoping, wondering why it brooded over her solitude in the old days, and now nests far aloof—but she'll never, never ask."

"But, Margaret, my child, you'll know I love you! Every day will show you. How can you doubt?"

"I shouldn't doubt. But I should want to hear. Do you stop saying your creed because you've learned it? For love will mean something else then. Now it says, 'I've chosen you. I want you.' Then it would be, 'You are all I thought; yes, more! You are sweeter, fairer. I am grown closer to you.' But you won't say it, and I, if I'm clever, shall never beg you to."

"Not say it? Why sha'n't I say it?"

"Truly, Tom, I don't know! Just because men don't. I've observed them. They can't, after twelve months. It's morally impossible. You get used to joy as you do to the sunset. I notice you don't write poems to the clouds in the west. You just take your pipe out of your mouth long enough to remark, 'By George!' and then go on smoking. But you prize the sunset just the same."

"I see. I'm not clever, but I can understand. Some men do talk about the sunset. They make poems, and gabble everlastingly. You don't like my kind, that's all."

"Not like your kind? I adore it. You're just plain man. Them's the jockeys for me. (Oh, don't look at me owlishly, with your grand air! It's a quotation, and I'm stark mad to-night. I'll quote what I please, if it hits the prayer-book.) I love your kind, and you supremest. But I don't expect you to be articulate. You won't be. You can't."

"Now, it's no fair. I won't play. It seems to me I've spent the last ten months in telling you that one thing—I love you. And I'm ready for the home stretch: ten years, twenty, sixty!"

"Dear one, how good you are! But it won't avail us. You think you'll go on saying that baby catechism; but you won't. That's the A-B-C; you'll clamor for Third Readers. And believe me, I wouldn't have you other than your kind. Marry a pioneer? Not I! The van of human-racing's not for me. Only, as I say, you shall be left to your silence. You sha'n't be nagged. Not you!"

"What next? Read us the prohibitory statutes."

"Margaret enlightening the world! Well, I will. I'd tell you the scheme of creation to-night, if I knew it. Rule two: I shall never criticise you."

"Then how sha'll I know when I offend?"

"You won't, but we must both put up with that, both of us. It will be more or less

stultifying, and we sha'n't breathe quite so freely, living in a fog. But that's of course. You must criticise me, you know, and I shall change—like a chameleon. That's woman's way. It distinctly isn't man's."

"Do you mean to tell me a man can't stand up and listen to his faults, and—yes, by Jove, be glad to listen?"

"My lord, no! not from the creature nearest him. Perhaps it savors too much of a house divided against itself, and he dreads the roof about his ears. I've observed that, also. If somebody who is not your wife reproves you with a pretty pout, you say she's fastidious, and it makes you fain to climb. But madam! she's a shrew. Away with her to the pond!"

"And so there is not to be the most perfect confidence between us? We are not to think aloud, lay our hearts bare."

"Not by any manner of means! We are to live in little citadels of rose-colored reserve. I'm to say to myself, 'In all the big things of life—all the things that matter—he's perfection. Let the little ones buzz about my ears like gnats. They won't sting me—*much*—and if they do, pray Heaven he doesn't see the scar!' A fair cheek or no favor! But do you know what will happen?"

"An earthquake, I should hope. Or thunder! Anything to clear the air."

"We shall live together fifty years in unbroken tranquillity, and you never will know you've married a whirlwind. Then some day I shall do just what I have to-night. I shall say, 'Tom, I hate, *hate* to have you wear side-whiskers.'"

"But I don't!"

"Child, that's only an illustration. I wasn't born literary, but I hope I know where to find a metaphor at need. 'I loathe your great-grandmother's picture. I'm unspeakably nervous when you play the fife after ten o'clock. I detest your habit of plaid trousers!'"

"And all these things could have been amended fifty years before, if you'd only spoken up, and said so!"

"Yes, Tom, so it appears to you now, and so it would appear to me then, or I shouldn't speak at all. I should be deluded by the strange thing we call a sense of justice, that rises up in us and cries, 'You have no business to let me be bothered by the midges you could sweep away with a breath!' And next day, bewailing my lost bower, what do you think I should do?"

"I'm at the point now where I don't know what anybody would do. Go on, you queer woman-thing!"

"I should curl up close to you, and tell you I was nervous and had a headache. And all the rest of my life I should try to make you forget."

"But all that isn't fair, Margaret. It isn't square dealing between man and man."

"Ah, but it isn't man to man. It's man and woman. That's what complicates it."

"I don't care. There ought to be rules to hit our common humanity; they should work both ways. You expect me to know things by intuition, and do things I can't see. Is it fair?"

"Not a bit. But I'm going to do things I *do* see, for reasons I want to kick over the moon. It's as broad as it is long."

"What reasons?"

"Well, reasons I respect awfully in the main, but which are like sackcloth in the wearing. You see, really and truly, Tom, I do reverence you beyond belief; and that reverence must go into the detail I hate. It must even keep me from revolt when you stroke my fur crosswise. It must make me finely courteous to you—always—always. It must make me vow I will exact nothing."

"But suppose I think you've a right to exact?"

"Ah, that shows how dear you are, but it makes it no more possible to do it. If I am a wise woman, I shall refrain. The soul is an awful goddess, Tom. We don't talk about her much, but she's there just the same. Stay outside the veil, and she'll whisper to you all day long; but invade her shrine, and she slips away. Worship her, and she'll follow; hunt her home, and you've lost her. It's because she's so shy and sweet that when you seem to change to me, I sha'n't say, 'Why?'"

"When I change! How queer it sounds!"

"When you *seem* to change! When I've lived near you so long that you forget whose breath it is, they mingle so. Then I shall stay beside you very softly, never once saying, 'You used to do thus and so.' I shall realize you're turning, growing, stretching up, and pray the Almighty, who contains us both, that I may grow too, and that our new branches mingle. You shall be free, dear one. There shall be no shadow of a bond."

"But I want bonds. I exult in them, when it's you. I demand them."

"Ah, so do I! and the outer ones—the

ones of inner honor, too—we shall reverence beyond words. We shall keep every jot and tittle of the sacred law. But, nevertheless, we shall guard the soul inviolate. She shall have her wings."

"So there are days when we do not really meet!

"Yes; days when you, monsieur, do not appear at the rendezvous. It's woman's sneaking habit to be always there. And on those days, when you are five-sixteenths indifferent to me, I shall become—another Margaret. I shall put on doublet and hose. Do you know, I've always wanted to write an essay entitled 'Concerning the Art of Being a Man'? For we've that to learn of you. When you are in trouble or perplexity, and your castle falls about your ears, what do you do? Go out into the world, and try to forget. But we! we sit and mull at home, growing sodden with tears. We think it a species of disloyalty to put our grief in a precious box and hand it back to Almighty God to keep for us, while we try to beguile our minds. But I have learned the formula. I know! When you drop away from me ever so little, I shall go out—out—anywhere; under the sky, among people. I shall try to find some joyance with my kind, and then, if I come back and we renew ours together, so much the happier I."

"Margaret, you have put me miles away."

"Yes; isn't it cold and dreadful—for a minute? But that doesn't last. It's the only way to be near together. If we clutch and cling, we sha'n't get anything but the air. If we reverence each other—serve each other—why, some day we shall realize that, as much as two souls can be, we are fused into one."

He sat looking at her in amazement. Her face was white and passionate. The hands he held had grown very cold.

"Margaret," he said, "how do you know all these things? Marriage—*my* marriage—is a simple enough state, full of happiness, content. You've been studying the internal polity. Where did you get your data? Does it come to round, silky-headed things unsought?"

The woman-look came into her eyes, the look of brooding and perhaps premonitory pain. She shook her head sadly, and smiled.

"We know lots of things we're never told," she said—"things like these. Sometimes I think we evolved them through all the generations when you went to war and we stayed at home and mused over the cradle. It's our

kingdom, really, you see, Tom. You're only Prince Consort. Don't you know that's why we're so pathetically different? It's a wonder we can speak a syllable of the same language. Our life has been all within for so many years that we keep the habit of secret, complex living yet. You must be patient with us. We spend our days hewing out our own crosses; you must come and give us drink."

She shook her head, with a very solemn look from far away.

"There's one pitfall," she said, "from which not even wisdom shall save me. Have I not learned the fallacy of wholesale betrayal? Have I not seen the woman sink and fail who throws away restraint and owns her worship? If she had kept one little fortress of reserve! If he had thought there was some inch of her he could not win! But no, poor princess! She pours her dowry down before him, and then walks beggared. If I could convince you that I should live if you deserted me! But no! I've told you I shall not, and I shall tell you yet again."

Silence fell between them, and in its hush she seemed to waken from another state—an unfamiliar one. She looked at him apprehensively; she shrank a little from his glance.

"And after all," he said, at last, "I haven't known you a bit. I didn't guess you had these thoughts, half-fears, half-tremors. Why, Margaret, you make me wonder whether you really will be glad!"

She stopped him, not by a word, but a swift curling up against his breast. He forgot what he was beginning to think, and gathered the whole sweet burden of her into his arms. She laid her cheek against his, and whispered to him divinely:

"What did I say, love? Forget it. These things don't matter. Nothing does but you. I'm not myself to-night. My head aches a little, and I'm nervous."

The formula rang familiar in his ear. It seemed to him he might have heard it, not long before; yet, when he looked down into her eyes, they were clear wells of shining light, and he found only his own image there. But as they sat thinking over the dear new world to be born to-morrow, another thrill of memory wakened in his brain. The tendency of their talk looked to him all of a piece.

"Dear!" he said. "Dear!" Then he stopped. Something was glimmering before

him, vague though palpable. Suddenly the outlined vision rose and took its shape to his mind's eye.

"Margaret," said he, "seems to me we've both been trying the boot on one foot. My faults, and how to weather them! I don't want to say it, but—how about *your* faults, dear?"

She pushed herself back at arm's length, her hands on his shoulders. Her eyes widened in a lovely and unreasoning terror.

"Why, Tom," said she, "you said—you've often said—I haven't any!"

He put her hands passionately to his lips.

"And it's true," he vowed. "It's God's truth. You haven't one."

They sat there still, knowing the unknown country was before them, and they were not afraid. At least the man was not; but the woman shivered a little, now and then. She was not adventurous, and she had chanced upon the bones of other travelers.